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ABSTRACT

A study explored the match between teachers' expectations for book reports and the outcomes their students exhibit. Subjects, 67 fourth graders, 61 seventh graders, and 56 tenth graders from low, middle, and upper income groups in 9 schools in 2 different school systems, completed a questionnaire that included questions concerning their preferences in types of books and book reports, and their attitudes towards reading and assignments. The nine teachers of the subjects completed a separate questionnaire that included similar questions. Results indicated that: (1) across grade levels, teachers and students did not agree on the types of book reports that students preferred; (2) even though teachers stated that certain types of book reports would help them to reach their goals, they did not assign these types; (3) a favorable relationship for student/teacher responses with regard to types of books that students preferred existed only at the fourth-grade level; and (4) while teachers indicated that the primary goal of book reports was to increase the number of books read by students, 25% of fourth-graders, 40% of seventh-graders, and 60% of tenth graders indicated that book reports did not cause them to read more books. Findings suggest that, when it comes to book reports, teachers and students do not communicate well. (RS)

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Running Head: READING AND REPORTING

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Reading and Reporting on Books:
Teacher Expectations and Student Outcomes

As far back as most of us can remember, teachers have assigned their students to read books for book reports. Over the years, teachers have developed some creativity in the types of reports they assign (e.g., Dyson, 1989; Louie, 1990; Schadt, 1989), but most can be classified as some form of either oral or written report. Nevertheless, such assignments are rarely greeted with sincere cries of joy on the part of the students. In fact, many students genuinely do not like to report on books at all (Weisendanger & Bader, 1989).

If students dislike book reports so much, then why do teachers assign them ? Many teachers say that they assign out-of-class reading to encourage students to read more (Poole, 1981; Powell, 1969). The hope is that if students read more, they will then develop a lifelong love for reading, gain world knowledge, and improve their written and oral communication skills (Carroll, 1967; Duke, 1981; Sloat, 1959). Many teachers seem to feel that some form of reporting is necessary so that students will be held accountable for their outside reading (Dwyer & Reed, 1989). Some teachers, in fact, have even admitted to assigning book reports just so that they can have a basis for giving a grade (Dunning, 1958). Poole (1981), however, states that accountability is

necessary not only to convince the teacher that the student actually read the book (Dunning, 1958), but to help students set aside time for reading, increase students' understanding, and facilitate deeper responses. The consensus seems to be that book reports are an effective means of encouraging students to read more and serve as a source for improving student attitudes toward reading.

A recent review of the literature, however, revealed little about the relationship between teachers' purposes in assigning book reports and actual student outcomes. It would be interesting to know if the teachers' expectations are being realized in the kinds of assignments they make, or if, in fact, they are not reaching their goals at all. The purpose of the present study was to explore the match, if any, between teachers' expectations for book reports and the outcomes their students exhibit. Some of the teachers' purposes described above were utilized, along with student reading and reporting behaviors also found in the literature, in formulating a survey of students and their teachers. Their responses and what they may reveal are described in the remainder of the paper.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 67 fourth graders, 61 seventh graders, and 56

tenth graders in nine schools in two different school systems. Fourth graders were in self-contained classrooms, while seventh and tenth graders were in English or language arts classrooms. School principals were asked to name teachers in their schools who utilized book reports with their students, and teachers were randomly selected from those named. Three classes were sampled at each grade level (nine classes in all), and schools were chosen so that low, middle, and upper income groups were all represented. Students were heterogeneously grouped in all classes except for one tenth-grade class, whose students were all average to above-average in reading ability.

Materials

Based on a review of the literature, two questionnaires were developed for students and their teachers. The student form contained 24 items, the teacher form, 27. Items were of various types (rankings, fill-in-the-blank, multiple choice, short response, etc.) and were written so that the fourth graders could respond to them independently. Appropriateness was verified by a panel of experts in the field of reading education. The information sought through items on both forms included (a) demographic data, (b) preferences in types of books and book reports, (c) general reading behaviors, (d) attitudes toward reading and assignments, (e) a description of the kinds of

assignments given, and (f) an assessment of teachers' goals in assigning book reports. In addition, teachers were asked to rate their students' preferences in types of reading materials, students' attitudes toward reading and reporting, and their own success in achieving their goals for book reports.

Procedure

One professor and eight graduate students in reading education collected the data for this study. One researcher was assigned to each of the nine participating classes. Using a script to ensure uniformity, the researchers visited the class and explained that a survey was being conducted about reading and attitudes toward it. To reduce potential bias, neither students nor teachers were informed about the study's specific focus on book reports. Students who both (a) returned a signed parental consent form and (b) signed an individual assent form, were allowed to participate in the survey, which was conducted approximately one week later. Teachers also signed written consent forms.

General directions given to the students and teachers during the actual survey time were that they were to work independently but could feel free to ask for clarification or further explanation of any item. Students were assured that their teachers would not see their questionnaires, in the hope that

honest responses would result. A period of approximately 20 minutes was needed for completion of the survey by students at all grade levels, and few students asked for item clarification. Many commented afterward that they had no trouble completing the questionnaire and that they found it pleasant.

Results

As might be expected, differences across grade levels were seen for both students and teachers. Younger students (grades 4 and 7) appeared to have a more positive attitude toward book reports and their effect on their reading attitudes and achievement (74% positive for fourth graders, 57% positive for seventh graders); tenth graders generally felt that book reports did not encourage them to read more (65% negative). Only fourth-grade teachers had a clear picture of their students' preferences in types of books for reading, yet all teachers claimed to work closely with their students in choosing the books to be read for reports.

Across grade levels, teachers and students did not agree on the types of book reports that students preferred, and even though teachers stated that certain types of book reports would help them to reach their goals, they did not assign these types. For example, seventh grade teachers said that informal book talks were the best for helping them reach their goals for book reports, yet

they most frequently assigned written book reports. Teachers also failed to assign the types of book reports that they felt their students liked best. For example, teachers frequently said that their students preferred art activities and dramatizations, yet the teachers most frequently assigned traditional written and oral reports.

Teachers did not appear convinced that students were reading the entire book before reporting (only 33% of the teachers believed this), yet an overwhelming majority of students (77%) claimed that they did. For the most part, students at all levels seemed to have a good understanding of their teachers' goals for assigning book reports, yet many of them (67%) felt that teachers had "giving a grade" as a major goal. No teacher at any grade level indicated this as a purpose.

Discussion

A favorable relationship for student/teacher responses with regard to types of books that students preferred seemed to exist only at the fourth-grade level. (Students preferred mysteries, sports, and fantasies, and teacher rankings matched the students'.) This finding may relate to the fact that fourth graders (in a self-contained class, as these subjects were) are with their teacher all day long so that stronger and closer interpersonal relationships may develop. Seventh and tenth

graders preferred the same types of books to read (mysteries), yet their teachers were unable to correctly rank their students' choices. For example, teachers ranked the students' number one choice as fourth, while stating that students preferred sports books. Students ranked sports books last. Possibly a reader interest inventory administered near the beginning of the year would be helpful in the communication of students' reading preferences.

Fourth graders and their teachers also seemed to share an understanding and regard for the importance of a classroom library, but by tenth grade, this understanding diminished. In fact, tenth graders either did not know what was meant by a classroom library or their teachers failed to communicate to the students the importance of using the facilities available. (Fifty-six per cent of students answered that there was no classroom library, while all teachers said that there was.) Perhaps teachers at the upper grade levels do not communicate to the students what a classroom library consists of, or the teachers find little time or need to utilize multiple printed sources aside from the required textbooks and publisher-provided supplemental materials. Students may not realize that newspapers, magazines, annotated anthologies, dictionaries, reference books, and other printed materials can be a classroom library; or, it may be that

such printed materials are not made available for students' use. Whatever the explanation, an apparent lack of communication between teachers and students seems evident.

A similar lack of communication was evident when students and teachers were asked whether or not book reports caused students to read more books. Approximately 25% of fourth graders, 40% of seventh graders, and 60% of tenth graders indicated that book reports did not cause them to read more books. Yet all teachers indicated that a primary goal of book reports was to increase the number of books read by their students and that felt they were moderately successful in using book reports as a means to reach that goal. Students also acknowledged this as a primary goal for teachers in assigning book reports but stated in large numbers (see above) that the book reports did not have this effect.

A final communication problem showed up when students and teachers were asked how books were chosen for the book reports. At both the fourth and tenth grade levels, students and teachers differed in their responses regarding how much help teachers provided to students, both in the form of suggested lists of books and guidance given to students. Often (59% of the time) students said that there was no list provided when the 55% of the teachers said that there was, and the opposite situation was also true. For example, 38% of fourth graders said that teachers gave them a

list of books to choose from, but all teachers said that no list was given. Students (61%) also replied that they chose books independently, while 66% of teachers said that the choices were made together. For some reason, these students and teachers are not communicating about how books can and should be chosen. Perhaps this finding is yet another indicator of why teachers' expectations for book reports assignments are not being met: they are simply not letting their students know what they want or expect of them.

Implications

The most generalized conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that, when it comes to book reports, these teachers and students do not communicate well. Prior research indicates that these findings are not new. What is needed are some positive suggestions for change. The changes needed do not appear to be radical in nature or in scope. Students do not necessarily dislike doing book reports; they simply want to have a say in the types of books they read, in the types of reports assigned, and better communication from their teachers in what they expect of them. For the teachers' part, they need only to listen to their students' preferences both in topics for reading and in ways of reporting on those topics and to communicate better what they want the students to get out of the book report assignments. Greater

trust between the two groups also is called for, but better communication should lead to better understanding, a necessity for real trust to exist. It appears, then, that we don't need to do away with book reports; we just need to do a better job of assigning them.

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